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3. CIVIC RESISTANCE

Towards a Conceptualization of Anti-racist Civic Engagement

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I examine the concern of policy makers and scholarship that racialized youth are participating in politics at lower rates than their forerunners and that this tendency is weakening the democratic systems (Kuttner, 2016; Sinclair-Chapman, Walker, & Gillion, 2009). Throughout the chapter I critically problematize and complicate how the discourse of civic and engagement are deployed, what it is good for and whom the concept works as a theoretical and political concept by locating them within specific material and historical relations. My interest is not simply to critique civic engagement scholarship but to centre race in my analysis in explaining relationship between citizenship, democracy, and resistance.

CONTEMPORARY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In recent years, the development of civic engagement among young people has gained considerable scholarly attention. Civic engagement refers to knowledge, values, attitudes and behaviours related to involvement in local community and broader society. Examples include knowledge of political systems, a sense of usefulness and social responsibility, political participation and civic activism (Kuttner, 2016; Sinclair-Chapman, Walker, & Gillion, 2009). More recently, these concerns have merged with discourses of equity. The rhetoric is that racialized students, racialized students of immigrant background, and students from urban and low-income communities demonstrate lower levels of civic knowledge, political efficacy, civic duty, and political activity when compared with their White counterparts (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2014; Gutierrez, 2014; Sinclair-Chapman, Walker, & Gillion, 2009). While these voices raise important issues, it often relies on a narrow view of civic engagement that emphasizes acceptable government processes, national history and identity, and attitudes of support for existing systems. Sidelined in this narrow vision are different systemic forms of engagement, the relevance of transnational identities, the roles of art and culture in civic life, and more critical or transformative approaches to engagement (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2014; Gutierrez, 2014; Kuttner, 2016; Goessling, 2017; Kliewer, 2013). As many scholars suggest, narrow view of civic engagement does not engage youth in political life and is deficit based which

ignores not only the unique histories, identities, social locations of youth but also avoid the opportunity to tap into the many visible ways youth, particularly those from low-income communities of racialized, are already engaged in civic life (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2014; Gutierrez, 2014; Kuttner, 2016; Goessling, 2017; Kliewer, 2013).

Even though policy makers' concerns on civic engagement are supported by mainstream scholarship which looks at the issue from a particular lens, there is evidence that the civic engagement of racialized youth has always been different and further transforming from more capitalistic understanding to more collective and participatory ones (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2014; Kuttner, 2016). Some of the reasons why young people across the racial and socioeconomic spectrum are turning toward more participatory forms of civic engagement is that they are traditionally alienated from institutional politics and public life due to social, political, and economic oppressions (Pearson-Merkowitz, 2014; Kuttner, 2016; Goessling, 2017; Bertrand, 2016). Furthermore, youth are drawn to online and interest-based communities that are marked by more horizontal power relationships and that involve many of the skills and attitudes of participatory democracy but are often not considered "political" spaces (Kuttner, 2016; Sinclair-Chapman, Walker, & Gillion, 2009). Moreover, youth civic engagement is increasingly intertwined with cultural production, including the complex ways young people engage with the arts and popular culture through consumption, remixing, and (re)production. Therefore, traditional measures may also be inadequate for understanding civic development in low-income racialized communities (Gutierrez, 2014; Rich, 2015; Goessling, 2017; Bessant, 2003). Historically, members of oppressed and racialized communities have often eschewed formal politics for more local, solidaristic, cultural, extra-institutional, and covert forms of resistance (Bertrand, 2016). While racialized youth may not engage in institutional politics (e.g., voting, calling a representative) at the same rate as their White peers, they often demonstrate comparable or higher rates of engagement in other realms, such as local community involvement, online participation, mutual support (e.g., translating for neighbours), and involvement in cultural organizations (Gutierrez, 2014; Pearson-Merkowitz, 2014). Finally, racialized youth has played important leadership roles in many of the past century's major social movements. However, they are less likely to be motivated by national identity than by racial or ethnic identity, which may extend across national borders (Gutierrez, 2014; Pearson-Merkowitz, 2014; Bertrand, 2016).

Situating Myself

I am an after-school teacher who has been working in various middle schools across Toronto in the past five years. The organizations that I have been working for collaborate with Toronto District School Board and provide programming in Toronto's schools within the scope of civic engagement. My responsibility as a teacher is to teach how to take social action and to facilitate community action projects. Ministry of Children and Youth Services and other big funders such as United Way